



achieve
academic
excellence

Exam Anxiety Strategies



Goal: To be in a state of “relaxed alertness” when I enter the exam room and write the exam

The following is a list of suggestions.

Well In Advance of the Exam

Create a study plan

-The earlier this is done the better. The more prepared you are for what needs to be covered and when you plan on working on it, the better you will feel. Leaving things to the last minute will only increase your level of anxiety. Start studying as soon as possible. Remember, no amount of good strategies will help if you are unprepared.

- **Organize your course-related material.** Figure out what needs to be covered (i.e., reading, lectures, etc)
- **Work on mastering the main concepts** of the course rather than trying cram everything into your head without understanding it.
- **Break each course into small pieces** according to what needs to be covered. Plan for each piece separately and make sure everything is accounted for.
- **Think about what type of questions may be asked.** Try to **predict what will be on the exam** based on professor's comments, passed exams, discussion with classmates. What are the priorities?
- **Get help** with challenging areas NOW.
- **Set realistic targets, learn core concepts and learn them well.** Don't panic about not having enough time to cover all the details.
- **Be an active learner.** Make sure you are actually learning the material as you go through it – stop and create questions and answer them **OUT LOUD** without looking!
- **Do past exams** (not the night before). Practice writing with a time limit.

Implement the Study Plan: TIME MANAGEMENT is key!

- Always, **break up big chunks of time into smaller chunks** and work on different priorities.
- Use all of your **small chunks of time** (e.g., time commuting, waiting for a class to start, etc)
- Be **specific** about how you plan to use each chunk of time (e.g., 'read 1 chapter from sociology text' vs. 'read sociology'; 'answer 3 review questions' vs. 'study sociology')
- Be **realistic** about what can get done in any given chunk of time
- Plan to work for **25 minutes and then take a 5-minute break** –use a timer!
- **Keep reviewing what you have studied ACTIVELY** –create and answer questions, recite main points (don't just read notes again!)

Stay focused!

- Use the **5-minute strategy** if you're having trouble getting started. This is a great strategy for when you are having trouble started. Set timer to 5-minutes and jump in. Most of the time motivation will kick in once you've started and if it doesn't you can choose to switch to another high priority.
- Use a blank piece of paper or notebook to **"park" distracting thoughts/ideas** and set a time to deal with them.

Note:

-The time management and study skills strategies are good habits to have starting from the first day of class!

-If you are uncomfortable with your study habits think about buying a book, making an appointment with a learning counselor, or visiting the drop-in center.

- Good Resource: Paul, Kevin (1996). Study Smarter, Not Harder. Vancouver: Self-Counsel Press.

Visit the exam room

-Especially if it is one you have never been in.

Confirm the time

-Double-check the schedule and write it down

Visualize yourself taking the test

-Put yourself into a positive frame of mind by imagining how you would LIKE things to go.

-Imagine yourself at the exam feeling confident and relaxed –try to picture it in as much detail as possible. This can help replace negative, anxious thoughts with more positive ones.

Encourage yourself

-Notice the negative thoughts and beliefs as they surface.

-Challenge them using the questions we covered

-Replace these anxious beliefs with more supportive, helpful statements.

-Practice saying these positive and empowering statements over and over to yourself.

Practice relaxing

It's hard to panic when you are relaxed. Make sure to give yourself time to relax especially last thing at night. Different ways of relaxing are: a long bath, stretching, listening to music, keep breathing, mediation, etc.

**We remember more when we are relaxed!

Take care of your body

When you are tired and your body is run down, your problem solving skills are impaired, learning and memory suffers and productivity and focus diminish.

- Eat healthy foods. Go for protein and avoid lots of carbohydrates and greasy foods.
- Avoid caffeine and sugar. Pay attention to your intake of coffee, tea, chocolate, colas, and sugars. Excessive consumption of any of these may heighten or even create symptoms of anxiety. They can lead to light-headedness and add to pre-existing exam nerves.
- Drink lots of water and/or juice.
- Get enough sleep each night. Decide what time you should go to sleep and make it a routine. You need to be well rested for studying as well as writing the exam itself.
- Exercise regularly. This routine will strengthen your body as well as allowing it to release any built-up tension. A walk around the block will do wonders!

Cultivate concentration

- Pick up a practice that cultivates concentration; for example, yogo, tai chi, meditation, etc.

The night before

Prepare what you will need for the exam

- Have a list and gather all of your supplies (eg., 3 pens, 3 pencils, calculator, watch, ruler, snack, earplugs, etc)

Stop studying well before you want to go to sleep –at least 1 hour.

- Complete your final review, pack your supplies, pack your lunch, do something relaxing (eg., read, watch TV, etc) and then go to sleep

Check your alarm clock

- Check and double-check that it is set for the right time
- Make sure you give yourself enough time to wake up, shower, eat a good breakfast and get to the exam without undue stress

Practice deep breathing and muscle relaxation

- This will help you fall asleep easier and get your body ready for the next day

The morning of

Wake up in good time and take time for a light meal

-Eat nutritious, energy enhancing, blood-sugar balancing foods –protein.

Resist temptation to do last minute revision

-Anything learned at this point will only cloud your mastery of the overall concepts of the course.

Arrive early

-Plan your arrival time to be approximately 10 minutes before you are allowed into the exam room so as to ensure that you are not running in at the last minute. This can also save you from hearing other students talk about how stressed, or even worse, how confident they are.

Distract yourself

-If you find yourself surrounded by other students and you feel yourself getting nervous, find someone to talk to about something unrelated or listen to music...anything to get your mind off the exam.

Have a strategy in mind

-Look over the whole exam first. Do the questions you know first, that ones that are easiest for you. Move on to the next question if you get stuck.

-Budget your time according to the weighting of the marks.

In the Exam

Introduce yourself to the person supervising the exam

-Let her/him know you sometimes experience exam anxiety and that if you need anything you will ask. If anything does come up they already know you and can immediately help with whatever is needed.

-Ask instructor if you can relocate to a different seat because of distractions

Plan where you'd like to sit

-Do you work better sitting in the front where you can't see anybody, or in the back where nobody can see you? Plan in advance.

Make yourself comfortable

-Sit with your eyes closed for a short while. Take a few, deep, slow breaths to reduce tension. Then turn over your paper.

Reward yourself after the exam, whatever the outcome

-You did the best you could!

IF YOU FEEL PANIC SETTING IN...

Breathe!

- Stop and take a deep breath in and a long breath out.
- Breathe in again and straighten your back
- Look straight ahead at something inanimate (the wall, a picture, the clock...) and focus your mind on a positive thought "I CAN DO THIS EXAM". Say it as you breath in and out.
- Take another deep breath in and a long breath out. Then breath normally and go back to the exam.

Stop your thoughts

When our anxious thoughts are running rampant, halt them by mentally shouting 'STOP"! Picture a road 'STOP' sign. Once you have literally stopped the thoughts, you can continue or practice a relaxation technique.

Repeat a mantra to yourself

A mantra is a word or phrase that you repeat over and over again. Saying something like 'calm' or 'relax' or saying your positive, empowering statement in your head, again and again, can help defuse anxiety.

Note:

If you have tried everything, and you feel that nothing has made a difference, consider booking an appointment with a counsellor.

Adapted from:

- Johnson, S. (1997). Taking the Anxiety Out of Taking Tests: A Step-By-Step Guide. New Harbinger Publications, Inc.: Oakland
- <http://www.dundee.ac.uk/counselling/leaflets/briefexa.htm>
- <http://www.sfu.ca/hccc/pdfs/Exam%20Anxiety1.pdf>
- <http://www.brookes.ac.uk/student/services/health/exam.html>